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Stagecoach Days

In these days of airplanes and express trains it is hard to realize that great lunging stagecoaches once carried passengers and mail across Iowa. To visualize the big swinging coaches as they rounded curves, topped the hills, and came bowling into town is to recreate the days of Washington Irving and lend the atmosphere of New England to the prairies of Iowa. The spirited horses, the burly, whip-cracking drivers, and the hospitable landlord in his rude but romantic tavern — all contributed to the picturesqueness of stagecoaching.

There was a veritable network of stage lines across Iowa in the forties and fifties. Practically every community was served. The main lines ran east and west, connecting the inland towns with those on the Mississippi. The principal routes were from Dubuque to Cedar Falls, Dubuque to Iowa City, Clinton to Cedar Rapids, Davenport to Council Bluffs by way of Des Moines, Davenport to Cedar Rapids, Burlington to Des Moines by way of Mount Pleasant, Fairfield, Ottumwa, and Oskaloosa, Keokuk to Keosauqua, and Oskaloosa to Council Bluffs by way of Knoxville, Indianola, Winterset, and Lewis. Routes running north and south from Cedar Falls to Cedar Rapids, Iowa City to Keokuk, and from Dubuque to Keokuk by way of Davenport,

Muscatine, and Burlington connected these main lines and served much the same purpose as do the branch-line railroads of to-day.

Over these routes the coaches of the Western Stage Company, Frink and Walker, the Ohio Stage Company, and many local concerns, such as Hatch and Company, plied regularly. The Western Stage Company was the largest and operated all over the State so that there was keen competition when any of the other companies ran stages over the same road. This rivalry resulted in races, each driver determined to show that his stage was the fastest. Fares were reduced by the competing companies and at times it was cheaper to live on the road than at home, since transportation cost next to nothing and meals and lodging were thrown in to boot.

There was also keen competition among the companies for contracts to carry the mail. These contracts were presumably let to the most favorable bidder but the intervention of the local Congressman was usually necessary to secure a contract. For transporting the mail between terminal towns a stage company received from three hundred to seven hundred dollars a year, depending upon the distance and time required.

The vehicles used in early Iowa as stagecoaches ranged all the way from a farmer's wagon to the aristocratic Concord coach, the Rolls-Royce of achievement in American horse-drawn vehicles. In the later days of stagecoaching the wagons were

used only in cases of emergency but in newly opened country they constituted the entire rolling stock. Frink and Walker operated two-horse wagons — “wagons without springs and with white muslin tops” — from Des Moines until 1854 when they sold out to the Western Stage Company. Two-horse “jerkies” then supplanted the wagons and were in turn replaced by the Concord coach. The jerky was in type the immediate forerunner of the coach but was not so large or as elegantly furnished.

The body of the Concord coach was approximately oval in shape but flattened on top to make a place for baggage. There was also a triangular, leather-covered space at the rear known as the “boot” to hold such baggage as could not be carried on top. Inside the inclosed body were three seats each designed to hold three passengers. The front seat faced the rear. The driver sat outside on an elevated seat in front of the covered body. The body of the coach was swung on “thorough braces” composed of several strips of leather riveted together and fastened to the bolsters much the same as the cables of suspension bridges are fastened to the piers. As the coach body was oval it rocked to and fro on the flexible thorough braces, subjecting the passengers to a series of rocking-chair oscillations whose violence was directly proportioned to the roughness of the roads. The coach body inside and out was brightly painted, the panels being decorated with landscapes. Each coach bore the name of some

noted personage, a practice which was later transferred to the early locomotives and afterward adopted by the Pullman Company.

The stage driver was considered a man of consequence and never missed an opportunity to impress this fact upon all who came in contact with him. On the road his word was law. If he ordered a passenger out of his stage, reckless was the man who resisted. It was also a bad policy to make derogatory remarks about his horses. The drivers claimed the right of way because they carried the government mail and thus arose many a dispute between the wagon drivers and the stage drivers.

Both the arrival and departure of a stage at a tavern was made with the team lashed into a run. In this exploit the stage driver was greatly admired by the spectators, and many a small boy secretly practiced flourishing a whip so that he too might some day become a driver. Of one such boy it is related that "with wide open eyes and bated breath" he had seen "the great old Concord stage come into town with four prancing horses and was nearly blinded in looking upon the great man who held the lines and the beautiful long whip — the observed of all, the glass of fashion and the mold of form." This boy had seen the stage tavern and had observed how the great people of the village sank into insignificance before the swaggering, tobacco-chewing, and broad-belted stage driver. "He was the man of authority with whom even the schoolmaster would

esteem it a most distinguishing honor to have been found in company or in confidential conversation." One driver, Ansel Briggs, who came to Iowa in 1836 and operated a stage in Jackson County, became the first Governor of the State.

But the work of the stage driver was not all swagger. On the road he was lookout, pilot, captain, conductor, engineer, brakeman, and fireman — in fact the whole crew. It was his duty to read the road and to know every hill, slough, stump, and stone, but skilled as he was he sometimes misjudged the condition of the ground. Where one day he passed safely over, the next day his wheels would break through and find no bottom. Where he encountered a bad piece of road with no way around he had to go through, trusting to luck and his own skill for success. Obstreperous passengers, balky horses, and bandits were also sources of irritation and danger to the driver. Mail robberies, although not unknown in Iowa, were not as common as in the gold districts of the Far West.

For the most part the stage companies in Iowa were big corporations. The Western Stage Company, for example, operated stages throughout eight middle western States. At important cross-roads of transportation large stations were established which served much the same purpose as railroad division points. The Western Stage Company had such a station in Iowa City where they kept various supplies and about a hundred mechan-

ics. An army of drivers and agents were employed throughout the State. Stations were established from ten to fifteen miles apart for changing horses. On the arrival of a stage the tired team was quickly unhitched and a fresh four pulled the coach to the next station. Sometimes a tavern was kept in conjunction with the station. All this took a great amount of planning of schedules and distribution of supplies, not unlike the management of the modern continental railroad companies.

Fares per mile by stage varied from station to station and depended somewhat upon the competition. In the summer, when the roads were good, fares were lower than in the winter. Stage fares also varied in some sections of the country according to the size of the passenger, the companies maintaining that the heavy traveller should pay more to ride inasmuch as he took up more room and was harder to pull. A hundred pounds was considered the unit for rate making and all passengers weighing more than that paid excess fare. There is no evidence, however, that the stage companies followed this practice in Iowa. The fare charged by Frink and Walker from Des Moines to Keokuk, where "they made close connections with America", was ten dollars a passenger. In general it may be said that rates averaged from five to seven cents a mile. Free transportation was given to members of the legislature on their way to and from the capital, a practice which was later adopted by the railroads.

The coming of the land seekers to Iowa gave the stage lines a great deal of business: a company which operated between Des Moines and Boone made one hundred thousand dollars in a single year. The success of the Western Stage Company may be judged by the fact that their stock advanced from one hundred dollars to two thousand dollars a share, and at that price it was never put on the market. Although the Civil War tended to decrease immigration it did not decrease the volume of business, for the stage lines transported troops and military equipment. The entire Twenty-third Iowa Infantry and its equipment was carried from Des Moines to Iowa City by the stages in three days, while the Thirty-third and Thirty-ninth and parts of the Second, Sixth, Tenth, and Fifteenth regiments reached their rendezvous in the same way.

When the roads were bad the stages could not run on schedule. Sometimes they were delayed for days. Under such circumstances the first-class mail was sent through by post riders on horseback but the newspapers had to wait for the stage. In March, 1859, the Vinton *Eagle* complained that it had received only "one mail from the East last week, and we expect another this week — that is if Sharp's 'snail-galloping plugs' don't get stuck in the mud somewhere between here and Cedar Rapids." On another occasion the same journal declared that Sharp's plugs "got to town only twice last week with the mail" and were "behind again this week".

It was a mystery to the editor why the contract for that route could not be given to "parties who can make the time at least thrice a week". He concluded with the comment that the "Western Stage Company's coaches arrive punctually every day, and if that company had the contract our Post Office would be regularly supplied."

On the other hand when the roads were good the mails arrived more regularly by stage than later when carried by rail. The Anamosa *Eureka* during the Civil War praisingly recalled the days of the stage mail: "So it is probable that the Federal troops have won a great victory somewhere, but we poor benighted 'cusses' will have to wait until next week, probably, before we learn the particulars. Oh, for the good old times when we had a daily *stage* instead of a bare railroad track!"

The early roads of course did not follow section lines for the country was not yet surveyed. Some followed the river courses while others clung to the ridges. Across the level prairie the trail followed the most direct route, avoiding sloughs and buffalo wallows as far as possible. Even so mud holes developed and river bottoms had to be crossed. When one track wore full of ruts a new one was made.

Although the stagecoaches endeavored to run on a definite schedule, mud and inclement weather often interfered. In the spring it was not uncommon for a stage driver to carry rails to pry his coach out of the mud. Three and a half miles an hour was con-

sidered fairly good speed. The Skunk River bottom was the bane of the Des Moines traveller. There during wet seasons the Western Stage Company used yokes of oxen and wide-tired wagons. Eventually the worst places were corduroyed and then the passengers were almost jolted out of their senses.

Overcrowding of coaches caused the passengers undue hardship. Although from seven to nine was a load as many as twenty were sometimes carried in one stage, some riding with the baggage on top. On exceedingly rough roads the pitching of the coach back and forth fairly disjointed the backs of the passengers. Under such circumstances the corner seats were the most comfortable for there a person could brace himself. Sometimes coaches upset.

But these incidents show the unpleasant side of stagecoach travel. The other side was one of jolly passengers, smooth roads, hearty appetites, bounteous meals — and the coaches were not always stuffy and overcrowded. Stage trips were sometimes made interesting by the presence of Congressmen, writers, and foreign notables as fellow travellers. Chance acquaintances in the coaches spun many a yarn, and probably a nip out of a bottle by those of strong constitutions added to the merriment of stage travel.

Henry Tisdale, who once lived in Iowa, described the pleasant aspects of stagecoach days. "There probably is no more pleasing sight", he said, "than to see, as I have many a time, a fine stage team hitched to a Concord coach, well loaded with passen-

gers", to "hear the driver's horn", and to "see the stage swing along like a thing of life. The horses tramp in unison; the axles talk as the wheels work back and forth from nut to shoulder-washer". To see the "driver, with ferruled whip, and ivory rings on harness, drive up and say, 'Whoa!' unhitch the horses, and see them take their places in the stable like they were human; see the next team started from the stable by speaking to them, and take their places at the coach so the breast-straps and tugs can be hitched without moving an inch, every horse in his place", he declared, was "one of the finest scenes on earth, and the delight of an old stage-man who has staged continuously for forty years."

Though the stagecoach seemed to be at the height of prosperity and efficiency during the fifties and sixties, its end was near. The first sign of death was the shifting of schedules and terminals to make connections with the advancing railroads. Following this the graceful Concord coach gradually receded before the invasion of the iron horse and, though lingering for years in sequestered regions, it finally became extinct. The Western Stage Company, which had flourished for thirty years, dissolved on the first of July, 1870. Their coaches, which cost on an average of a thousand dollars, were sold for old iron as low as ten dollars apiece. The stagecoaching days were ended in Iowa.

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